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Esculent Birds Nests, Tin, and Fish: The Overseas Chinese and Their Trade in the Eastern Bay of Bengal (Coastal Burma) During the First Half of the Nineteenth Century

by

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Introduction

¹Materials for this paper were gathered from the National Archives of the Republic of Singapore, the Library and Museum of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in Calcutta, the Burmese collection of the Northern Illinois University Library, the library of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (Singapore), the Rackham Library of the University of Michigan, and Microfilmed holdings of the Colonial Office (Great Britain) in the Central Library of the National University of Singapore and the National Archives of Singapore. I am thankful to these institutions for their help. I would also like to thank Dr. Liu Hong (National University of Singapore) and Atsuko Naono (University of Michigan), for their helpful comments and suggestions. Any errors remain my own responsibility.

Over the past decade or so, there has been increasing interest in intra-Asian trading activities.² The ubiquitous role of the Overseas Chinese in region-wide Asian trade has made them an important focus for research on the South China Sea, just as scholars of the western Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal examine Overseas Indians, Europeans, Armenians, and Persians, amongst others.³ The bifocality of scholarship on intra-Asian trade has thus left a geographical and conceptual rupture between east and west. Studies of the Overseas Chinese and their trade networks, for example, focus upon insular Southeast Asia to the neglect of Chinese maritime activities in western mainland Southeast Asia, just as studies of the maritime trade of western mainland Southeast Asia focus upon Indian and European trade networks often with no or little mention of

² See, for example, the collection of essays in A. J. H. Latham & Heita Kawakatsu (eds.), *Japanese Industrialization and the Asian Economy*, (London: Routledge, 1996); Takeshi Hamashita, "The Intra-regional System in East Asia in Modern Times", in Peter J. Katzenstein & Takeshi Shiraishi (eds.), *Network Power: Japan and Asia*, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 113-135; Anthony Reid (ed.), *Sojourners and Settlers: Histories of Southeast Asia and the Chinese*, (London: Allen & Unwin, 1996); Wang Gungwu "Merchants Without Empire: The Hokkien Sojourning Communities," in Sanjay Subrahmanyam (ed.), *Merchant Networks in the Early Modern World*, (N.P.: Variorum, 1996), p. 50-71; Liu Hong, "Organized Chinese Transnationalism and the Institutionalization of Business Networks: the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry as a Case Analysis", *Southeast Asian Studies* 37.3 (December 1999), p. 392-417; and Eric Tagliacozzo, "Secret Trades of the Straits: Smuggling and State-Formation Along a Southeast Asian Frontier 1870-1910", unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1999.

³ See, for example, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Iranians Abroad: Intra-Asian Elite Migration and Early Modern State Formation", in Sanjay Subrahmanyam (ed.), *Merchant Networks in the Early Modern World*, (N.P.: Variorum, 1996).

connections with the Overseas Chinese. The triangular network connecting together coastal Burma, the Straits of Melaka (in the present paper, Penang in particular), and Southeastern China, however, cut across this regional divide and played a critical role in providing financial support to Chinese networks typically posited by historians solely in the South China Sea. Similarly, despite important and recent work on Chinese interactions with western mainland Southeast Asia (particularly Upper Burma), little attention has been paid to Chinese trade and other activities in pre-twentieth century coastal Burma.⁴ One purpose of this paper is thus to make a modest contribution to the overall picture of Chinese trade networks by offering additional data and observations on coastal Chinese trade north of the Straits Settlements in the first half of the nineteenth

⁴ For examples of recent work on work on historical interactions along the border between China and Upper Burma, see Laichen Sun, "Ming-Southeast Asian overland interactions, 1368-1644", unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 2000; Geoff Wade, "The Spread of the Theravada Tradition in the Tai Polities of Yun-nan 14th-18th Centuries", paper presented at the Third Euro-Japanese Symposium on Southeast Asian History—Religious Diffusion and Cultural Exchange in Southeast Asia (University of Hamburg) 7-9 September 1998; and Charles Patterson Giersch, Jr., "Qing China's Reluctant Subjects: Indigenous Communities and Empire Along the Yunnan Frontier", unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1998. For an overall look at Chinese sources on this inland interaction, see the excellent bibliographic survey in Laichen Sun, "Chinese Historical Sources on Burma: A Bibliography of Primary and Secondary Works", *Journal of Burma Studies* 2 (1997), p. 1-116. Work on the Chinese in coastal Burma prior to the twentieth century includes Chen Yi-Sein, "The Chinese in Rangoon During the 18th and 19th Centuries", Ba Shin, Jean Boisselier, and A. B. Griswold (eds.), *Essays Offered to G. H. Luce by His Colleagues and Friends in Honour of His Seventy-Fifth Birthday*, (Ascona, Switzerland: Artibus Asiae, 1966), p. 107-111; Michael Walter Charney, "Problematics and Paradigms in Historicizing the Overseas Chinese in the Nineteenth- and Twentieth-century Straits and Burma", *Journal of the South Seas Society* 54 (1999), p. 93-106.

century.

In this paper, I intend to approach Asia from Asia. Some scholars, for example, have stressed that East Asian history (and by implication, Asian trade) needs to be examined in East Asian terms.⁵ This will be the second goal of this paper: I seek to contribute to this growing body of work by identifying and contextualizing some historical developments that may not have played a fundamental role in European-ordered historiography, and have thus slipped out of the historical narrative (but not necessarily out of European documents), but would be important to Asian-ordered historical narratives. My case study is the Chinese trade in early nineteenth century coastal Burma.

My chief sources for this paper include a variety of different kinds of source materials. First, I have examined the relevant Burmese-language materials, including the *amein-taws* (royal orders made by the kings of Burma), the *Kon-baun-zet Maha-ya-zawin-taw-kyi* (a Burmese chronicle), and an account (translated into Burmese in 1821 or 1822) of a Vietnamese Embassy to the Burmese court. I have also used a wide range of English-language primary source materials, including the *Straits Settlements Records*, first-hand British accounts of the period, and contemporaneous Straits Settlements newspapers such as the *Penang Register and Miscellany*, the *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, and the *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*.

Esculent Birds Nests

⁵ Hamashita, "The Intra-regional System in East Asia in Modern Times" p. 113-135.

A discussion of the Overseas Chinese in coastal Burma in the first half of the nineteenth-century must begin with one of their first long-term economic activities in the area: the collection of bird products from the islands and coasts of the Eastern Bay of Bengal. A range of bird products accounted for some of the most important nineteenth-century trade items that were sought out by traders in coastal Burma for export to markets catering to Chinese communities (both in the Straits of Melaka and in China). Important bird products collected in this area for these markets included eggs, feathers,⁶ and skins.⁷ For coastal Burma, however, the gathering of esculent birds nests formed the most important part of the "bird product" trade.

Although the gathering of birds nests from coastal Burma may have occurred far earlier than the nineteenth century, evidence for the funneling of coastal Burmese birds nests for the China market chiefly becomes available and then dramatically increases from the early nineteenth century. There are several possible explanations for this change. First, with increasing British trade activities in the area accompanying the emergence of the Straits Settlements (including Penang, Melaka, and Singapore) from the 1790s and the British annexations of coastal Burma in 1826 (Arakan and Tenasserim coasts) and 1852 (Lower Burma proper), commercial intelligence gathering rapidly increased from the beginning of the nineteenth century. Second, the founder of the Burmese Konbaung

⁶ In mid-April 1844, for example, "native craft" brought 176,000 birds feathers from Tavoy to Penang. *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle* (20 April 1844), p. 3.

⁷ On occasion, for example, Chinese merchants gathered birds skins and sold them to decorate ceremonial clothing. For an example from the Straits, see the case of the sale of one hundred thousand birds skins from Tavoy, with their feathers attached, at Penang in 1828, for the sum of forty Spanish dollars per hundred skins. *Penang Register and Miscellany* (19 March 1828), p. 1.

Dynasty (1752-1885), Alaunghpaya (r. 1752-1760), had literally laid waste to coastal Burma in his wars of expansion in the 1750s and, afterward, his successors tried to keep a tight grip on their coastal provinces, often forbidding maritime trade save for critical exigencies and then only with explicit royal orders.⁸ Substantial evidence exists for other kinds of trading commodities, however, so that either of these suggestions alone is probably not a sufficient explanation.

A more likely possibility is that growing domestic Chinese demand for esculent birds nests (or the emergence of Overseas Chinese settlements with similar desires) may have pushed bird product-gatherers further afield, beyond the Gulf of Thailand and Straits of Melaka and into coastal Burma. Likewise, traders may have gone further afield to gain cheaper supplies of these products. The argument in favor of increasing domestic demand in China as an answer is supported in part by the evidence of an embassy sent to Burma in 1820 (and arrived in 1821), by the Governor of CochinChina (Southern Vietnam). The purpose of this mission was to get permission from the Burmese court to buy esculent birds nests on the Tenasserim Coast and to sell them in China in order to increase the Vietnamese governor's personal wealth.⁹ There is no evident precursor to this

⁸ On 18 November 1807, for example, a royal order was issued by the Burman court, commanding that Arakanese paddy (from Danra-waddy, Rama-waddy, Dwara-waddy, and Mekha-waddy), be exchanged, likely with European or Indian traders, for imports of coats. See Royal Order 18 November 1807, in Than Tun (ed.), *Royal Orders of Burma, 1598-1885*, (Kyoto: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University, 1988), VI, p. 541.

⁹ Two English-language accounts of this trade are provided in Suzanne Karpeles "Note on a Manuscript Relative to a Burmese Embassy to CochinChina", *Journal of the Burma Research Society* 42.2 (1959), p. 2-7 and B. R. Pearn, "The Burmese Embassy to Vietnam 1823-24", *Journal of the Burma*

mission and it appears that news of a ready supply in coastal Burma of esculent birds nests that could be sold in China was new to the Vietnamese governor. It also does not appear entirely coincidental that Vietnamese attempts to get involved in esculent birds nest trading began in the early 1820s, at roughly the same time as other evidence for the sudden boom in this trade along the Burmese coasts.

From the early 1820s, evidence emerges for Chinese activities in coastal Burma's esculent birds nest trade. Swallows along the Burmese coasts and elsewhere, made these edible nests in rocky crags, often on hilly islands (especially available in the Mergui Archipelago and the Tavoy Island group). The nests were translucent and were made of a glutinous secretion from the bird. These nests would then be gathered and sold for shipment to Chinese markets where they were considered a tasty delicacy.¹⁰ We have some details concerning the cultivation of these nests by gatherers from the early nineteenth century:

Research Society 57.1 (1964), p. 149-172. A much more detailed account of the Vietnamese journey to Lower Burma is available in Burmese in Royal Order 25 April 1822, in Tun (ed.), *Royal Orders of Burma*, VIII, p. 384-398. See also the same account in U Maun Maun Tin, *Kon-baun-zet Maha-ya-zawin-taw-kyi*, 3 vols., (Yangon: Hanthawaddy Press, 1968), II, p. 346.

¹⁰ For an early description for Southeastern Burma's birds nests see James Low, "History of Tennasserim", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 3 (1836), p. 45. Southeastern China was not the only market for the birds nest, for, by the end of the nineteenth century at the latest, birds nests were also carried to the Shan States by Yunnanese caravans coming on their return from Moulmein. H. Warrington Smyth, "Notes on a Journey to Some of the South-western Provinces of Siam," *Geographical Journal* 6.5 (November 1895), p. 417.

"[They come] during the dry season to watch the caves, and to build and repair the frameworks necessary for collecting birds' nests attached in the sombre caves, on the most lofty, dangerous, and inaccessible parts. . . Irregularities will occur as long as the localities which the swallows frequent are not ascertained, which is the more difficult as these birds change their abodes . . ." ¹¹

The Vietnamese account (translated in 1821 or 1822 into Burmese) of the Vietnamese trade mission of 1820-21 mentioned above, for example, provides some interesting details regarding early Chinese involvement in the esculent birds nest trade. On their way up the Straits of Melaka, the Vietnamese touched on Singapore, Melaka, and Penang. While at Penang, they ran into several traders. One of these traders was the holder of the Burmese royal birds nest farm for Southeastern Burma, who gave them his official Burmese royal title, "Thiwa-Kyawthu-Nawrata." As the Vietnamese travelers explained:

"In Palou Pinan [Pulau Penang], while we made enquiries among the traders, we met some Tayop [Chinese] who had come from the town of Dawei [Tavoy] to trade. The Lord ruler [of Burma] had been made one [of the Chinese traders] a great man, being placed in charge of the bird mountains and bird islands in the town of Dawei [Tavoy]. He had been bestowed with the

¹¹John William Helfer, "Fourth Report on the Tenasserim Provinces Considered as a Resort for Europeans", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal* 9 (1840), p. 184.

title of Thiwa-Kyawthu-Nawrata with the insignias of office. After he showed us the insignias, we believed him and then we told him that we wanted to arrive at the royal region and royal country [Burma] and in doing so, Thiwa-Kyawthu-Nawrata lent [us] a pilot who knew the water route [to Burma]."¹²

Thiwa-Kyawthu-Nawrata appears to have been one of the pre-colonial Chinese immigrants into Burma who quickly became wealthy by monopolizing important commodities through cooperation with Southeast Asian royal courts as described by John William Helfer in the 1830s. According to Helfer, "the small number [of Chinese] who did settle [in Burma], acquired wealth and consequence, by succeeding in monopolizing the few lucrative branches of occupation in [Burma]."¹³ Thiwa-Kyawthu-Nawrata controlled not only the farm for the gathering and trade in birds nests for the Tavoy area (the Tavoy Island group), but apparently also for the Mergui Archipelago.

Although Thiwa-Kyawthu-Nawrata's personal name has not yet been located in the Burmese- or English-language sources, he was known to early British authorities in colonial Tenasserim, who appear to have de-individualized him (as was a common practice in early British writings on the Chinese in Burma, as "the Chinese" in plural). James Low, writing in 1830s, had been informed by a certain Mr. Gibson that "the Chinese" prior to the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-1826), paid twenty thousand *ticals*

¹² Royal Order, 25 April 1822, in Than Tun (ed.), *Royal Orders*, V, p. 384; Tin, *Kon-baun-zet Maha-ya-zawin-taw-kyi*, II, p. 346.

¹³ John William Helfer, "Third Report on Tenasserim -- the Surrounding Nations -- Inhabitants, Natives and Foreigners -- Character, Morals and Religion", *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 8 (1839), p. 988.

a year (or that value "in kind") for the farm.¹⁴ "The Chinese" in this case was probably conveyed by Gibson in the singular and it almost certainly referred to Thiwa-Kyawthu-Nawrata. This assertion can be made in part because Low's description of Gibson indicates that Gibson is the same Englishman who was the Burmese royal *shahbandar* of Rangoon, who had accompanied the return mission to Cochinchina that had carried Thiwa-Kyawthu-Nawrata away from his Tavoy birds nest farm, and who had died of Cholera shortly after his return back to Burma through the Straits of Melaka. Gibson most certainly would have received his information from Thiwa-Kyawthu-Nawrata and, having died while serving British forces as an interpreter in Prome a few months after his return to Burma, he is unlikely to have been familiar with any Tavoy birds nest farmer other than Thiwa-Kyawthu-Nawrata. Further, a Vietnamese-language account from an 1823 Vietnamese manuscript refers to a member of the return Burmese mission to Cochinchina as including, amongst other important persons, a certain Tu-Gia-No-Ta, which appears to be a Vietnamese corruption of Thiwa-Kyawthu-Nawrata.¹⁵

It is interesting that in the Vietnamese account, as related in the Burmese-language royal orders and in the *Kon-baun-zet Maha-ya-zawin-taw-kyi*, the nature of Thiwa-Kyawthu-Nawrata's farm is described as "*hnek-kyun hnek-taun mya ko a-oub akyoub kan-ta-thu Tayop lyu myo Thiwa-Kyawthu-Nawrata* [the man of the Chinese race, Thiwa-Kyawthu-Nawrata, who was appointed to rule over the bird islands and the bird mountains]."¹⁶ There is no mention of specific economic rights, but rather the blanket

¹⁴ Low, "History of Tennasserim", p. 45.

¹⁵ See an English translation of this account in Karpeles, "Notes on a Manuscript", p. 5.

¹⁶ Tin, *Kon-baun-zet Maha-ya-zawin-taw-kyi*, II, p. 346.

term for 'rule.' This agrees with what early British observers gathered from local interpretations of the sway carried by the control of the royal Burmese birds nest farms along the Southeastern Burmese coasts and the accompanying Tavoy and Mergui island groups. As James Low relayed Burmese oral traditions regarding Thiwa-Kyawthu-Nawrata:

". . . the Chinese, of course, took a wide range of [liberties]; . . . the Burmans say, that when Mergui was handed over to them, the sovereignty of all the islands down to Junk-Ceylon, was also considered as alienated in their favour."¹⁷

Even more importantly, the Burmese king ordered Thiwa-Kyawthu-Nawrata to go with the return royal embassy to Vietnam, indicating possibly his importance, but more likely his knowledge, of the coastal trade, ships, and routes in order to secure the safe arrival of the mission at Southern Vietnam. This is supported in part by evidence of the place in the mission of Gibson (the same Gibson mentioned above): Gibson had previously made the voyage to Cochinchina, and would otherwise be an unlikely choice to accompany a royal mission so far from Lower Burma.¹⁸

¹⁷ Low, "History of Tennasserim", p. 45.

¹⁸ There is a wealth of information on the progress of this mission, as their ship was burned on the way, at Singapore, and were provided with a loan, via the efforts of Gibson, from the British colonial authorities in the interests of good state relations, in order to secure passage on a Portuguese vessel headed for Macao. For the return journey they were provided with a junk provided by the court of the Vietnamese governor in Cochinchina. For some of the documents related to these events see, for example, *Straits*

In any event, the British occupied Tenasserim in 1824, as part of the hostilities that had opened up between the Burmese and the British. At the conclusion of the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-1826) and the Treaty of Yandabo (1826), the British formerly annexed two large sections of coastal Burma, Arakan in the West and Tenasserim in the Southeast. One of the major concerns that guided the immediate British colonial administrators of these areas was how to make these new acquisitions pay for themselves. The solution pursued was to develop local commerce, with the help of Chinese merchants from the Straits, particularly from Penang, and those Chinese who had already settled in coastal Burma prior to the British arrival.

It is unclear if it was Thiwa-Kyawthu-Nawrata (who, like Gibson, may not have survived the embassy to Vietnam and the return voyage home) or another Chinese merchant who continued to control the Tavoy farm for esculent birds nests into the early years of British rule over the Tenasserim coast. British commanders and officials like Lt. E. Miles and John Crawford, for example, observed from the beginning of British rule in Southeastern Burma that the Chinese generally took the contracts for the esculent birds nest farm for the Tavoy area.¹⁹ In 1835, for example, one Chinese contracted the Tavoy

Settlements Records, Volume A-17, p. 184-189; Volume A-19, pp. 66-71, 152-162; Volume H-11, p. 335-337; and Volume I-23, p. 104-107. See also *The Burney Papers* (Bangkok: Vajiranana National Library, 1911), II, part 2, pp. 3-9, 123-124.

¹⁹ Both examples come from 1825. *Straits Settlements Records*, Volume A-18, p. 755; Volume H-13, p. 702.

farm for a five year period at the rate of 4,000 rupees every three months from 1835 until 1840.²⁰

At some point between Thiwa-Kyawthu-Nawrata's departure for Vietnam and the establishment of British rule in Tenasserim, the Mergui farm on birds nests was separated from the Tavoy farm, and was contracted out to an Armenian merchant known only as Mr. Sarkies (a forebear of the Sarkies hotel family?). In a letter from October 1825, A. de Maingy (first Commissioner for Tenasserim, 1825-1833), explained that he had not sold off the Mergui farm for birds nests and that the previous rentee had been Mr. Sarkies. Furthermore, Sarkies' farm had come to include not just birds nests, but all products from the islands of the Mergui Archipelago, a development that Maingy stopped. Interestingly, Maingy was to sell the farm off when he went to Tavoy shortly afterward and expected that "it is likely to be purchased to advantage by the Chinese."²¹

Although Maingy continued to rent out the farm for esculent birds nests for the Tavoy islands, he hesitated to do so for the Mergui Archipelago. The Mergui Archipelago was somewhat of a no man's land during the early period of British rule and there were few practical means of protecting the farm, if it were to be rented out. In 1826, Maingy suggested that a few gunboats would be necessary to protect the islands from Malay poachers of birds nests before the area could be farmed out.²² Little was apparently achieved by the end of the 1820s, as in 1829, Malays who left Penang for the Mergui

²⁰ E. A. Blundell, "Letter dated 9th December 1839", in *Selected Correspondence of Letters Issued From and Received in the Office of the Commissioner Tenasserim Division for the Years 1825-26 to 1842-43*, (Rangoon: Superintendent, Government Printing and Stationary, Burma, 1928), p. 187.

²¹ A. de Maingy, "Letter Dated 13th October 1825", in *Selected Correspondence*, p. 14.

²² A. de Maingy, "Letter Dated 25th February 1827", in *Selected Correspondence*, p. 54.

Archipelago and collected birds nests transgressing the farm were labeled "pirates" and were to be treated as such by British colonial officials.²³ These concerns and efforts were repeated in 1830.²⁴ By 1839, at the latest, however, this problem had apparently been rectified in part, as the birds nest farm for Mergui was back in operation, evidently being farmed out to Malays from Penang.²⁵ However, there were clearly problems in making the Mergui farm profitable, as the Mergui islands birds nests were farmed out at a substantially lower rate than for the Tavoy farm, being 2,000 rupees per year in the former and 12,000 rupees per year for the latter. This may reflect concessions in returns due to expected losses accountable to continued pilfering.²⁶

By the beginning of the 1840s, Chinese junk fleets began to go further northwestward, beyond the Tavoy and Mergui farms for birds nests. Some went as far as Ramree Island in central Arakan for esculent birds nests, as well as for fish. Arakanese fisherman did the actual gathering and stocked up the supplies for their sale to the Chinese junks.²⁷ Although it is unclear if a birds nest farm was established for any area in Arakan in the early years of British rule, British colonial authorities certainly did collect revenues on the collection of esculent birds nests. For the year 1835-36, for

²³ *Straits Settlements Records*, Volume K-14, p. 95-6.

²⁴ *Straits Settlements Records*, Volume B-10, p. 127-8.

²⁵ John William Helfer, "Fourth Report on the Tenasserim Province", p. 184.

²⁶ E. A. Blundell, "Letter dated 9th December 1839", p. 187.

²⁷ See Henry Harper Spry, "A Three Weeks Sail in Search of Health", *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* (1841), p. 143.

example, 106 rupees for the island of Ramree and 4, 160 rupees in government revenues for the whole of Arakan were earned on the collection of esculent birds nests alone.²⁸

Early Tin-Mining and Other Activities

Another important economic activity engaged in by the Overseas Chinese in early nineteenth-century coastal Burma was tin-mining. From the beginning, there was a strong relationship between Penang and Tenasserim in the tin trade. An account of the tin mining in Mergui in 1842, for example, explained that Chinese junks carried the tin from Mergui to Penang (from whence it was carried on to China, India, and London).²⁹ Tin was thus heavily in demand by the Overseas Chinese merchants in Penang and coastal Burma.³⁰ Further, indigenous Burmese oral traditions held that the technology used in smelting the tin in Tavoy was introduced by Chinese who came to this area of Burma from Penang.³¹

²⁸ Horace Ralph Spearman (comp.), *British Burma Gazetteer*, (Rangoon, Government Press, 1880), I, p. 472.

²⁹ G. B. Tremenheere, "Second Report on the Tin of Mergui", *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 11 (1842), p. 849. Tin was attractive to shippers because in addition to being a trade item, it could also be used for ballast in lieu of sand or stone by sailing vessels that had emptied their cargo holds. *Penang Register and Miscellany* (10 September 1828), p. 2.

³⁰ *Penang Register and Miscellany* (23 January 1828), p. 1.

³¹ Hl. L. Chhibber, "Geography of South Tenasserim and the Mergui Archipelago", *Journal of the Burma Research Society* 17.2 (1927), p. 146.

British colonial intentions regarding the Chinese role in Tenasserim's tin-mining were sometimes contradictory. In 1825, when the British decided to keep Tenasserim, which was not officially annexed until 1826, the colonial authorities fully expected to operate the tin mines under "British management."³² But labor for the tin mines would certainly have to be procured from the local inhabitants and, at first, from Asian migrant labor, particularly the Chinese. Maingy thought that the Chinese might become a good model for the Burmese to begin working the tin mines.³³ Similar sentiments were expressed by others: "An increase of [Tavoy's] Chinese population is much desired and not despaired of, since various productions of the neighbourhood are capable of inviting and rewarding their industry."³⁴ Even then, however, Maingy still warned against a long-term Chinese role, suggesting that the Chinese presence in Tenasserim was something British colonial authorities should control. Maingy suggested, for example, that the Chinese did not play fair in economic competition and leaned toward monopolization. As a result, Maingy urged, the majority of tin-miners should be local Burmese, and Chinese employment should be minimized. Otherwise, Maingy assured, allowing the Chinese a substantial place in Tenasserim's tin-mining would cost the province dearly in terms of "expensive foreign labour" instead of cheap local labor.³⁵

It is true that evidence for Chinese exploitation of coastal Burma's tin reserves, by contrast with that of a Chinese role in the bird nest trade, really only emerges from the 1820s. Even then, however, it does not appear that Chinese interest and participation in

³² *Straits Settlements Records*, Volume A-18, p. 743.

³³ *Straits Settlements Records*, Volume K-16, p. 38.

³⁴ *Penang Register and Miscellany* (9 April 1828), p. 1.

³⁵ *Straits Settlements Records*, Volume K-16, p. 38.

tin-mining in the Province of Tenasserim was necessarily sparked by British rule. Even before British colonial authorities had made significant efforts to promote tin-mining in the province, Chinese miners were already in the process of opening up tin mines there. As Maingy explained in one report, "parties of Chinese" were already forming and making arrangements to open up the tin mines in the province.³⁶

Likewise, the initiatives in promoting the immigration of Chinese labor for the mines came from Chinese labor entrepreneurs, *kangchu* or *kangchu*-like labor procurers, often despite the delayed response from British colonial officials. These labor entrepreneurs brought Chinese tin-mining labor to Tavoy and Tenasserim from the Straits Settlements. One Low Ah Chong, for example, suggested to Maingy that he would form a labor gang out of one thousand Melakan Chinese to work tin mines in Tavoy.³⁷ Voluntary Chinese migration to the province of Tenasserim from the Straits, again independent of British efforts, continued for the remainder of the first half of the nineteenth century. In 1842, for example, Chinese from "Tacopah" (Takuapa) began to arrive in Mergui to work on the mere hint of tin explorations.³⁸ For many of the immigrant Chinese laborers in Tenasserim, however, tin-mining would only be a temporary occupation.³⁹

³⁶ *Straits Settlements Records*, Volume K-16, p. 84-5.

³⁷ *Straits Settlements Records*, Volume K-17, p. 41.

³⁸ Tremeneheere, "Second Report on the Tin of Mergui," p. 849.

³⁹ As Tremeneheere observed: "They arrive in poverty, and are glad to accept the wages of common coolies in plantation work . . . till better employment is to be had." Tremeneheere, "Second Report on the Tin of Mergui," p. 849. Further, some of the Chinese who came to Tenasserim to engage in local trade, for example, had first been tin-miners in Malaya. For an example, albeit from 1891, but likely representative of

Certainly, there were a range of Chinese activities in coastal Burma in the first half of the nineteenth century that cannot be examined in depth here. The rice trade, for example, was certainly extremely important for Chinese traders in nineteenth century coastal Burma, and many became wealthy off of this trade or from their ownership of steam mills for the processing of paddy into rice later in the nineteenth century. The rice trade and the Chinese role in it, however, has been dealt with in depth elsewhere.⁴⁰ Further, evidence for local Chinese activities in the rice trade, aside from the shipping of the rice from Moulmein or Akyab to Penang and Singapore, generally does not become available until the 1850s, beyond the scope of this discussion. Instead, most Chinese involved in shipping rice from coastal Burma appear not to have been local settlers, but were, like a Chinese shipper named Chin Chew, who came all the way from Amoy to Arakan for rice in late 1844, long-distance traders who came from the Straits Settlements or even Southeastern China simply to pick up the rice and take it back home to market.⁴¹ Some hint of the range of other Chinese economic activities is important, however, chiefly because it indicates that the Chinese did not happen to stumble into one or two

early trends, of a Chinese who had been a tin-miner in Perak and then came to Mergui to settle and engage in local river-trading, see Arthur Keith, "An Account of a Journey Across the Malay Peninsula From Koh Lak to Mergui", *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 24 (December 1965), p. 40.

⁴⁰ Excellent accounts of the Burmese rice trade are available in Cheng Siok-Hwa, *The Rice Industry of Burma 1852-1940*, (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1968); Michael Adas, *The Burma Delta: Economic Development and Social Change on an Asian Rice Frontier, 1852-1941*, (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1974); and Willem van Schendel, "Origins of the Burma Rice Boom, 1850-1880", *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 17.4 (1987), p. 456-472.

⁴¹ See *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* (6 February 1845), p. 3.

economic niches (birds nests and tin, for example), but rather played a broad, diverse and substantial role in the economic development of coastal Burma during this period.

In the early nineteenth century, we do know that some Chinese traders brought their junk fleets to the Arakanese coasts for fish.⁴² It appears that this trade centered upon Ramree Island and Sandoway, and there is no indication in the sources that Chinese junks in pursuit of fish went further north than Kyaukpyu, the harbor on the north coast of Ramree Island. Unfortunately, however, there are no statistics available on the yearly amounts purchased or the average price of the purchase.⁴³ The organization of this trade was very simple. At the end of the rainy season, in expectation of the arrival of the junks, “innumerable boats” of indigenous Arakanese fishermen, sailed from Kyaukpyu to neighboring Combermere Bay. There they fished for the polynemous (and Isinglass as well). The catch was then cured in “large quantities.” Then, a Chinese agent ashore, acting on behalf of the junk fleets, purchased the cured fish.⁴⁴ During this period, Chinese also engaged in fishing along the coast of Tenasserim.⁴⁵ Additionally, the Chinese also bought the wings of “a species of king-fisher imported from India through Arakan.”⁴⁶

⁴²According to one 1841 account: “At certain seasons, at the close of the rainy months, innumerable boats go off to Combermere Bay, an extensive but somewhat shallow roadste[a]d, contiguous to Kyok Phyoo harbour, and here fish for the polynemous, the sounds of which they cure in large quantities, and sell to the China junks which annually pay a visit to the coast for the purpose of trading for these and other articles.” Spry, “A Three Weeks Sail in Search of Health”, p. 143.

⁴³ One example of a purchase made in 1841 is available, however: one which occasion a Chinese agent ashore acting on behalf of the junks prior to their arrival bought five *maunds* of Isinglass fish sounds at about 25 rupees per *maund*. Ibid., p. 143.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 143-144.

⁴⁵ Helfer, “Fourth Report on the Tenasserim Province”, p. 184.

Although many of the Chinese who traded along the Burmese coasts were likely based in Penang,⁴⁷ the Chinese settled in Southeastern Burma were also involved in both shipping and local trading. Overseas Chinese merchants in Penang, for example, certainly did have some of their ships built in Tenasserim from 1826,⁴⁸ but so too did local Chinese.⁴⁹ The Chinese themselves also appear to have played some role in local ship-building and ship maintenance in Tavoy. In 1826 in Tavoy, for example, the Chinese had "sunk mud-docks, where vessels" such as junks and prows "are repaired or built."⁵⁰ Frequent references to local junks owned by local Chinese traders also indicates that the Chinese in Burma were also participating in the Straits trade.⁵¹ We do not know a great deal about the actual crews of these junks or the equipping of the vessels. We do know, however, that in one important respect the Chinese junks in the Eastern Bay of Bengal were likely very different than the Southeastern Chinese junks that arrived in coastal Burmese ports for trade in the early nineteenth century. While junks coming from Southeastern China were manned by Chinese crews,⁵² those based in coastal Burmese

⁴⁶ Spearman, *British Burma Gazetteer*, I, p. 472.

⁴⁷ See reference for 1826, in Wilson, *Documents Illustrative of the Burmese War*, p. lvii.

⁴⁸ *Straits Settlements Records*, Volume K-16, p. 105.

⁴⁹ Helfer, "Fourth Report on the Tenasserim Provinces", p. 177.

⁵⁰ Wilson, *Documents Illustrative of the Burmese War*, p. liv.

⁵¹ During the revolt at Tavoy in 1829, one Chinese-owned junk was seized in the hopes of escape. J. Stuart, "Some Glimpses of Burma in the Early Nineteenth Century", *Journal of the Burma Research Society*, 6.2 (1916), p. 50.

⁵² See, for example, the description of the Chinese junk, operating out Amoy in 1844 under the command of Koh Tain Par, which encountered trouble in the Nicobars on the way to Arakan, and her crew of thirty-nine Chinese in *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* (6 February 1845), p. 3.

waters that we do know about used non-Chinese, often entirely Malay, crews.⁵³ This was an important difference, because Chinese captains (and, often owners as well) of junks crewed by non-Chinese likely found both an opportunity and an obligation to negotiate and interact with local culture if their trading or shipping activities were to be successful; it likely encouraged them to think of themselves as settlers rather than as sojourners. In any event, by the 1890s, local trading in many ports of Southeastern Burma was largely in the hands of local Chinese traders. This certainly was the case in the town of Mergui in 1891.⁵⁴

British Views of Chinese Immigration into Coastal Burma

European-ordered historiography of nineteenth-century Burma, especially from the colonial period (and this is still relevant, as this period of Burmese history has been largely neglected since the colonial period), has tended to approach the presence of Overseas Chinese in coastal Burma through either misunderstanding or silence. In the first case, the presence of Overseas Chinese in coastal Burma is represented as a response rather than a precursor to British expansion in the area and the emergence of a colonial economy after the First Anglo-Burmese War: as the colonial historian of Burma, G. E. Harvey claimed, "[b]oth the Indian and the Chinese minorities [in Burma] are the result

⁵³ In 1825, one such junk, commanded by a Chinese captain and crewed by eight Malay seamen, experienced a mutiny after it shipped out of Martaban for Rangoon. *Straits Settlements Records*, Volume A-23, p. 488-494.

⁵⁴ Keith, "An Account of a Journey", p. 41.

of our rule."⁵⁵ In the second case, the Overseas Chinese, not fitting very well into the European-centered approach to coastal Burma's history are simply 'dropped' from the standard historical narrative.⁵⁶ There is good reason to question both approaches, not least because even European documents inform us that the British stimulus approach to indigenous commerce during the early nineteenth century has left out important activities by the Burmese to stimulate trade with the Straits Settlements prior to the British invasion of Lower Burma in 1824.⁵⁷

An important reason for the European ordering of the place of Overseas Chinese in the historical narrative concerning nineteenth-century (and earlier) coastal Burma is that much of the colonial historiography on Burma was dependent for its perspectives upon European documents if not latent European biases prevalent in the colonial era. Contemporaneous British documents, for example, indicate that British officials believed significant Chinese immigration into Southeastern Burma would be a consequence of the British annexation of Tenasserim. As early as May 1824, John Crawfurd suggested that

⁵⁵ G. E.. Harvey, *British Rule in Burma 1824-1942*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1946), p. 14.

⁵⁶ The best example of this approach is B. R. Pearn, whose articles and books reveal an almost complete neglect of the Overseas Chinese role in the emergence of colonial Burma. See, for example, Pearn's magnum opus, *A History of Rangoon*, (Rangoon: American Baptist Mission Press, 1939).

⁵⁷ The Burman *myo-wun* of Tavoy took the initiative in 1824 of sending a commercial mission to Penang in order to make arrangements for trade relations between the two ports. Unfortunately, shortly after they arrived, the First Anglo-Burmese War had broken out and the envoys were sent home. See "A Retrospect of British Policy in the Straits of Malacca, from the Period of the First Establishment of Penang (17 July 1786) up to 1839", in *The Burney Papers*, V, part 1, p. 132. See also "The Letter of Chao Piah Prah-Klang Chao Kun Kosa to John Crawfurd Esquire, Resident of Singapore", in *The Burney Papers*, II, part 2, p. 124.

"Chinese [im]migrants . . . will soon be attracted to [Tavoy and Tenasserim] by the encouragement of our presence . . ."⁵⁸ One year later, in May 1825, British officials still repeated expectations of the "influx of Chinese settlers as a consequence of our occupation of the country."⁵⁹ Fourteen years later, however, British colonial authorities were still waiting for the large-scale Chinese immigration into Tenasserim that they had expected to come with the commencement of British rule. Helfer, writing in 1839, for example, admitted that there had been Chinese in coastal Burma during the period prior to the commencement of British rule, but they were small in number and remained so: "They do not palpably increase, but will certainly augment rapidly when the provinces become of greater importance."⁶⁰ It is true that Chinese immigration into coastal Burma increased after the British annexation. In 1826, for example, when the British began to build Rangoon, they laid out a European and a "Chinese town," and the Chinese soon after began to build their houses in it.⁶¹ Likewise, from the 1830s, permanent Chinese settlers rapidly increased in numbers.⁶²

But were British views of Chinese immigration into coastal Burma correct? If

⁵⁸ *The Burney Papers*, II, part 2, p. 45. See another copy in *Straits Settlements Records*, Volume H-13, enclosure, p. 702.

⁵⁹ *Straits Settlements Records*, Volume A-18, p. 743.

⁶⁰ Helfer, "Third Report on Tenasserim", p. 988.

⁶¹ Anonymous, "Occupation of Amherst [29 May 1826]", in Horace Hayman Wilson (comp.), *Documents Illustrative of the Burmese War With an Introductory Sketch of the Events of the War*, (Calcutta, Government Gazette Press, 1827), p. lii.

⁶² In 1836, for example, there were two hundred Chinese men in Tavoy (mostly married to Burmese women), five hundred Chinese men in Maulmain, and even some Chinese in Akyab. Howard Malcom, *Travels in the Burman Empire*, (Bangkok: Ava House, 1997), pp. 38, 63, 118.

they were, then this would lend support to a European ordering of coastal Burma's history, at least in some aspects. If we reevaluate the evidence and look at additional sources (even European ones) not considered by the British officials cited above, a different picture emerges. Chinese immigration into coastal Burma, for example, did not increase at a dramatically high rate of growth during the early years of British rule in Arakan and Tenasserim. The presence of Chinese settlers in coastal Burma prior to the 1830s, for example, appears to have been very low.⁶³ Likewise, substantial evidence exists for the long-term presence of Overseas Chinese communities in coastal Burma prior to the beginning of British rule in areas of coastal Burma. As mentioned above, many of the activities of Overseas Chinese in coastal Burma were already being undertaken when the British arrived. In other words, processes already underway were hastily and incorrectly assumed to have been begun or were causally intensified by British rule.

Conclusion

Why is the involvement of Chinese traders in various economic activities along the Burmese coasts in the first half of the nineteenth century worth our attention? For one thing, it challenges the division of Asian trading minorities between the South Asians in the Bay of Bengal and the Chinese in the South China Sea, with the Straits Settlements as

⁶³ In 1826, for example, there were only "very few" Chinese in Martaban. Wilson, p. xlix. Again, only "a few" Chinese were believed to have settled around Tavoy by 1828. *Penang Register and Miscellany* (18 June 1828), p. 2.

a kind of intermediary ground. Overseas Chinese have been active along the coasts of Burma for centuries and continued to do so into and throughout the colonial period. For another thing, the data available from early nineteenth-century coastal Burma paints a very diverse picture of the Overseas Chinese and their activities in the area. They were not simply traders or miners. Rather, they comprised a diverse group of laborers, traders, and entrepreneurs rather than a single, undifferentiated migrant community. Furthermore, the role they played in farming out significant commodities in the years prior to colonial rule indicates the strength of their presence in the area.

More importantly, looking at Chinese activities in coastal Burma in the first half of the nineteenth century indicates another way to look at the history of the region. Once British understandings of the period are balanced out by evidence that 'runs against the grain' of European-ordered understandings of Asian history -- in short, by looking at Asia from within Asia -- another picture of the region and its history emerges. This Asian perspective allows for a more accurate understanding of the place and progress of Overseas Chinese settlement and sojourning in the Eastern Bay of Bengal: the Chinese, for example, did not simply follow British expansion into coastal Burma. Indeed, Chinese immigration into coastal Burma, and their engagement in birds nest gathering, tin-mining, and other economic activities moved typically independently of, and often prior to, British initiatives.

Furthermore, when we look at events that are not important to European-centered historical narratives, additional and very useful information emerges that helps to deepen our understandings of both events and the people involved in them. The exchange of missions between Burma and the Vietnamese Governor of Cochinchina, for example, has

been relegated to a secondary position in the standard historical narrative because the return of the Burmese mission arrived just as the British invaded Lower Burma. For Burmese historians and chroniclers, such as U Maun Maun Tin, it was a very important series of exchanges. More significantly, the Burmese stress the role of different individual actors. In the Burmese version of the story of the diplomatic exchange between Burma and CochinChina, as found in the royal orders and the *Kon-baun-zet Maha-yazawin-taw-kyi*, for example, the role of the Chinese farmer of the Tavoy birds nests is stressed, while no Englishman is mentioned as a member of the mission. By contrast, in the British colonial version, both in the contemporaneous European documents in the *Straits Settlements Records* and in the British colonial historiography based upon them, such as Pearn's and Karpeles' articles in the colonial-era *Journal of the Burma Research Society*, no Chinese birds nest farmer is mentioned, and, instead, all attention is focused on the English *shahbandar* of Rangoon named Gibson. Different perspectives yield different histories; by balancing out European-ordered histories with perspectives of Asia looked at from within Asia, a more accurate understanding of the early nineteenth-century Chinese in the Eastern Bay of Bengal, along the coasts of Burma, and of the overall history of the region during this period will hopefully result.